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ABSTRACT

Sixteen first-year elementary school teachers participated in telephone interviews and classroom observations that focused on decision making processes before and during reading instruction. The most difficult aspect for the majority of teachers interviewed was explaining what influenced their decisions. The major decisions made prior to reading centered around grouping, techniques, materials, and pacing. Initial placement of students in reading groups was based on standardized reading test scores and recommendations made during the previous year, while the decision to rely heavily upon oral reading performance and phonics ability seemed to be a function of both the reading consultant's practices and the new teacher's own experience as a reader. Neither informal reading inventories nor training from methods courses were used in the placement. While concerned about flexibility in meeting individual needs of students, only about one quarter of the teachers routinely considered making reading group changes throughout the year. Teachers did not feel the pressure for pacing with children in high ability groups that they felt with those in low reading ability groups. Techniques for instruction centered on student motivation rather than on effective teaching strategies. Teachers seemed to feel a need to complete the lesson as planned or to wait until after instruction to formulate any new teaching plans. Such changes seemed related to the use of new materials to teach the same skill rather than a different approach. The results suggest that teacher educators should help prospective teachers view themselves as decision makers, and should use a planning process that encourages prospective teachers to consider alternative teaching strategies. (HTH)

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BEGINNING TEACHERS: HOW DO THEY MAKE DECISIONS ABOUT READING?

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As we look into classrooms today, attempting to identify effective and ineffective educational practices, our attention is directed toward the major influence in the classroom, the teacher (Bond & Dykstra, 1967, Early, 1976). Each day teachers make a variety of decisions that impact upon students and the learning environment of the classroom (Shavelson and Borko, 1979). The decision making skill of teachers has been considered to be a significant variable that influences instructional effectiveness (Clark & Yinger, 1978; Shavelson, 1973; Shulman, 1975; Shulman & Elstein, 1975). Many of the decisions made by teachers are focused upon developing students' skills in reading.

To date, studies of teachers' skill in making decisions about reading instruction have dealt primarily with experienced teachers. This paper focuses upon the decision making processes utilized by beginning teachers. As the process of decision making is studied, the potential exists not only to improve the skills of teachers in the field (Sherman & Brown, 1979), but also to help preservice teachers approach reading instruction more as a decision making process.

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What Do We Know About Decision Making?

Researchers suggest that the behaviors exhibited by experienced teachers during reading activities are a reflection of decisions made prior to instruction. Planning serves as a blue print for teachers' classroom behaviors (Stern & Shavelson, 1983). Preactive decisions, those made prior to instruction (Shavelson, 1976), are typically focused upon grouping students for instruction, which also effects pacing. In addition, teachers plan the tasks to be completed along with the materials to be used. (Buike, 1980; Stern & Shavelson, 1981). Planning does not appear to be influenced by the teacher's conceptions of reading (Bawden, Buike, & Duffy, 1979; Buike, Burke, & Duffy, 1980) or the training they received in planning for instruction (Stern & Shavelson, 1983).

Interactive decisions, those made during instruction (Shavelson, 1976), must be made quickly with little time for reflection. Stern and Shavelson (1983) refer to these decisions as "in-flight" decisions. To preserve a smooth flow of activities, plans are often not changed significantly during instructional interactions between teacher and children. Buike (1980) observed that even poor performance by children on tasks seldom became the basis for teacher decisions to reteach specific skills. When decisions were made to alter preactive plans, few alternatives seemed to be considered. Teachers tended not to

evaluate alternatives critically, but rather to seek confirmation for their original choices (Stern & Shavelson, 1983).

Teacher behaviors during preactive and interactive decision making raise several questions for educators involved in teacher preparation programs. Do undergraduate elementary education programs help beginning teachers develop concepts of themselves as decision makers in relationship to the instructional process? Do the decision making behaviors reported by beginning teachers parallel studies of experienced teachers as decision makers? To begin examining the decision making skills of beginning teachers, interviews were conducted with beginning teachers.

Studying Beginning Teachers

A sample of 16 first-year elementary school teachers was randomly drawn from the elementary level Entry Year Assistance Committees (EYAC) in north central Oklahoma during the 1983-84 school year. Every beginning teacher in Oklahoma is provided with an EYAC comprised of an administrator, a consulting teacher with similar expertise, and an educator from a college or university. The members of the EYAC provide support to the beginning teacher throughout the first year, to promote successful entrance into the profession and consider recommendations for certification at the end of that year.

Each of the 16 beginning teachers who were selected agreed to participate in two telephone interviews that focused upon both preactive and interective decisions in reading. The telephone interviews were conducted by the writer between March and May of 1984 and averaged 35 minutes in duration. In addition, seven of the teachers were observed three times during the school year for an average of ten hours per teacher. Each teacher in the sample had been employed since the beginning of the 1983-84 school year. All grade levels from first through sixth were represented, with seven primary grade teachers and nine intermediate grade teachers participating.

Beginning Teachers and Preactive Decision Making

During the interviews, teachers were asked to discuss decisions made prior to reading instruction and why that particular choice was made. The major decisions centered around grouping, techniques, materials, and pacing. For the majority of teachers interviewed, the most difficult aspect was explaining what influenced their decisions. For the most part, the teachers had not considered the factors influencing their behavior and found it difficult to discuss this aspect of decision making.

Initial placement of students in reading groups was based upon standardized reading test scores, oral reading performance, and decoding ability. None of the teachers had

administered complete informal reading inventories to determine placement of students. In some cases, placement recommendations had been made during the previous year and were honored at the beginning of the new school year until student performance could be observed. Decisions to rely heavily upon oral reading and phonics for placement purposes seemed to be a function of the practices of the consulting teacher who was assisting the new teacher and the beginning teacher's own experiences as a reader. Training from methods courses did not appear to be a major contributing factor in the decisions.

Concern for meeting individual needs of students was discussed as a high priority. A majority of the teachers believed that groups should be flexible and students should be allowed to move when needed. However, only about one quarter of the teachers routinely considered making group changes throughout the school year.

Teacher behaviors varied between groups as had been noted by observations of experienced teachers (Stern & Shavelson, 1981). For children placed in the high groups, the beginning teachers did not feel the pressure for pacing as with low reading groups. The writer believes this may have been because the majority of high groups were placed in the grade level reader. In addition, this relaxed attitude with the high reading groups seemed to allow for more open discussion and less emphasis on specific skill development,

especially decoding. Teacher behavior seemed to convey the message to the high groups that reading is a meaning-getting process and something to be enjoyed. While for the low groups, reading became a code breaking process and required great effort.

Identifying the reading skills deemed appropriate for a given set of students seemed to be synonymous with the scope and sequence of activities presented in the basal readers or other materials that were available. As with the studies of more experienced teachers, the beginning teachers' plans were aimed at the completion of the task or materials. The teachers did not seem to have a sense of an overall scope and sequence for their grade level. Also, most of the beginning teachers did not identify long range goals as having an impact on their planning process. They seemed to be in the survival stage of teacher development as described by Katz (1977), whereby they planned on a day-by-day or weekly basis.

Pacing of the reading groups seemed primarily to be a question of how much time to spend in group each day and how many stories per week to read so that the book(s) would be completed by the end of the school year. Long range goals for development of skills did not seem to be as much of a concern. Decisions were influenced by the pacing of the consulting teacher and other teachers at the same grade level, by the wishes of administrators, and somewhat by the

perceived needs of the reading group. A majority of the teachers seemed to be driven by pacing expectations, especially to move the low groups through the materials.

Concern for techniques of instruction centered around how to motivate students rather than the most effective strategies for helping students learn. Most teachers felt that the decisions they made related to teaching a specific skill were the result of suggestions from consulting teachers or basal reader teacher editions. Some beginning teachers felt they often made decisions in a trial-and-error manner. Few had referred back to instructional strategies taught in methods courses.

The preactive planning process described by the teachers seemed to be a rather traditional one. Usually only one activity was identified at a time for the teaching of a particular skill. It was usually a workbook page or a group activity described in the teacher edition of the basal reader. The teachers did not anticipate what to do if difficulties appeared. Alternative activities were not considered which made responding spontaneously very difficult.

For the most part, the beginning teachers expressed a concern for their lack of knowledge about reading, especially those placed in first and second grade, but they were earnestly trying to provide the best instruction

possible for their students. All of the teachers seemed genuinely concerned for their students' progress.

Beginning Teachers and Interactive Decision Making

During the interviews, teachers were asked to focus upon decisions made during the instructional period when they were interacting with children. They were asked to discuss changes they made in plans formulated during preactive decision making and the motivation for each change.

The ability to make changes in previous plans in a spontaneous manner was of great concern to these new teachers. They seemed to feel a need to complete the lesson as planned or to shorten or stop the lesson and wait until after instruction to formulate a new plan that might be tried on another occasion. As a group, the beginning teachers felt that they lacked the background knowledge and experience to know immediately what they should do when faced with a problem during instruction. They didn't trust their ability to make effective interactive decisions.

Criteria for deciding about changes in preactive plans were determined by student difficulty with tasks, usually in completing a paper and pencil activity assigned during the reading group. Successful completion seemed to be synonymous with an accuracy rate equivalent to an independent reading level, even when the skill was first being introduced.

Decisions about instructional changes seemed to center upon the use of a new material to teach the same skill rather than a different approach. Again trial and error, the teacher's personal experience as a learner, and the type of materials available seemed to heavily influence the decision. Unfortunately, relying upon the teacher's personal experiences only seemed to make it more difficult for the beginning teacher to understand why individual children were having difficulty. In a few cases, teachers referred back to college texts or district curriculum guides for direction.

Evaluation of activities did take place, but usually after the instructional period. The criteria for deciding to repeat an activity was difficult for the beginning teacher to verbalize. Usually student feedback was given as the reason, but probing for more specific criteria yielded little. At this stage of their development, the teachers did not think in terms of quantitative criteria for judging the appropriateness of activities. They also did not regularly distinguish between levels of performance expected for introductory activities and independent practice.

Implications

The beginning teachers in this study found themselves faced with making a variety of decisions which

were reflected in their behavior as they taught children to read. Like their more experienced colleagues, the beginning teachers made preactive decisions that focused on the management of reading groups, skills, and materials to achieve instructional goals. Preactive decisions were often influenced by other teachers, administrators, or personal experiences of the beginning teacher, but seldom influenced by training. Preactive planning usually identified only one type of activity to accomplish the desired task.

The beginning teachers felt less secure about interactive decision making than preactive and tended not to change plans during instruction. Altering plans occurred after lessons were completed and were usually aimed at task completion. The beginning teachers felt they lacked the knowledge to make spontaneous decisions during instruction. When lessons were planned, beginning teachers had not anticipated what they would do if a problem was encountered and, therefore, had not considered alternative activities or strategies for a particular lesson.

Results of this study serve as a beginning point for learning about the decision making strategies utilized by first year teachers. As a teacher educator, the writer suggests the following for consideration in undergraduate teacher preparation programs: 1) helping prospective teachers view themselves as decision makers and 2) teaching of a planning process that encourages prospective teachers

to consider alternative teaching strategies for each instructional activity.

In summarizing existing research on experienced teachers' judgments and decision making skills, Stern and Shavelson (1983) concluded that there is a need for teachers to be aware of the importance of daily routine decisions. In addition, teachers should be aware of their own thinking and decision strategies. Finally, Stern and Shavelson suggest that "reading teachers need to experiment with and modify their decisions to see if practice is improved." (p.284)

As prospective teachers begin learning about the teaching of reading perhaps courses need to be structured to allow students the opportunity to exercise their own decision making skills. By approaching instruction as a decision making process it may be possible to alter the views of what it means to be a teacher that are often influenced by personal experience and classroom observations. Presently, it appears that methods courses may not be having as significant an impact in teacher training as are other factors.

In addition to approaching teaching as a decision making process, the planning for instruction might be approached as an "if...then" proposition. When planning for a lesson, teachers should consider alternative instructional strategies, along with the accompanying materials that would

be needed. If alternative activities are prepared, perhaps interactive decisions would not be quite as difficult for teachers, beginning or experienced. Initially, though, considering alternatives may increase the amount of time required for preactive planning.

Utilizing an "if...then" planning process, teachers would be exercising prediction skills that are believed to promote better reading through activiation of prior knowledge. Perhaps the same principle which underlies the use of prediction may enable teachers to anticipate student needs and responses with greater accruacy. Teachers might then be better prepared to make "in-flight decisions. In addition, the more sensitive the teacher becomes to student learning patterns, the more accurate preactive planning may also become.

Educators who are concerned with the effectiveness of reading instruction should consider strategies that would improve the decision making skills of both beginning and experienced teachers. Studying how beginning teachers make decisions about reading may also lead to improved teacher preparation programs.

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